



“Connecting Excellence in Schools”

Michigan Department of Education
Instructional Excellence Conference Summary
December 11-12, 2003

INTRODUCTION

On December 11-12, 2003, approximately 150 Michigan educators assembled at the Michigan State University Kellogg Center for the Instructional Excellence Conference. The purpose of the conference was:

- To share promising practices that address how to design and deliver instruction that engages students and deepens knowledge
- To provide support systems to high priority schools
- To learn from front line educators
- To uplift the education profession
- To expand the network of practicing, recognized educators
- To maximize the involvement of the network in improving education in Michigan

Those in attendance included: elementary, middle, and high school teachers and administrators from Michigan's high priority schools; educators recognized through the Christa McAuliffe Fellowship Program, Michigan Teacher of the Year Program, Milken National Educator Award, the Department of Education's Partnership for Success Program, the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, Principal of the Year Programs, and National Board Certification. Ben Perez, consultant with Transformations, facilitated conference activities.

Day One of the conference focused on expanding the network of educators. Action steps identified include prioritizing the proposed activities and developing a steering committee.

The recognition banquet, sponsored by DTE Energy Foundation, celebrated the commitment and excellence of Michigan educators. Nancy Moody, Director of the State Government Affairs Office with DTE Energy, thanked the educators for all they do to help Michigan children learn. Also joining the recognized educators at the banquet were State Board of Education members Kathleen Straus, Herbert Moyer, Liz Bauer, and Carolyn Curtin; Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins; staff from the Michigan Department of Education; and representatives of many state-level education associations.

Day Two began with an uplifting greeting from Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm. She focused on the incredible power teachers have in transforming the lives of children in our state. She spoke about her personal experience and emphasized her commitment to education, especially during these troubling financial times. She stated that teachers are her heroes. The balance of the day focused on sharing promising practices and providing support to high priority schools.

The following summary has been prepared to further guide the work of the Network and High Priority Schools. Questions regarding the conference may be directed to Jean Shane, shanej@michigan.gov or 517.241.2375; or Betty Underwood, underwoodb@michigan.gov or 517.335.3401.



December 11, 2003

I. Appreciative Inquiry

A. Participants engaged in an organizational development process entitled “Appreciative Inquiry.”

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is the cooperative search for the best in people and their organizations. It focuses on the positive in a system and involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to heighten positive potential. Through the use of an “exceptional moment” interview, participants use the inquiry process to explore imagination and innovation instead of negation, criticism, and design. It explores the “best of what is.” The AI interview protocol ends with asking participants to state three wishes for improving the quality of instructional practice in our state. Following are the responses to that question.

B. Wishes Expressed by Participants

- Tap existing and internal expertise
- Eliminate bureaucracy...fix the system
- Build relationships
- All teachers should strive toward excellence and begin to teach conceptually
- Schools should become the focus in a community
- There should be a statewide dialogue that is productive and leads to action
- We should celebrate the profession and increase recognition programs
- There should be meaningful and reasonable ongoing assessment
- There should be a shift in public opinion toward positive expectations of schools
- Increase support at the university level in terms of teacher training
- Collaborative effort in Michigan where districts work together to increase instructional excellence
- Higher standards for administrators
- Equity among all districts in Michigan
- Create learning cultures that embrace change and risk-taking
- Increase quality support for teachers
- Develop a can-do attitude about change
- Provide collaboration time for teachers
- Enhance teacher and administrator pre-service preparation
- Develop a clear and consistent vision of instructional excellence
- Take responsibility for the learning of all kids
- Expectation of high quality from all in the education community
- Tap into the potential of all teachers (network could address)
- Positive working environment (more collaborative atmosphere) between teachers and administrators

C. What needs to be done to put the wishes into operation?

- Link people (establish a network) who have the credibility to increase instructional excellence statewide
- We have the means to change the educational environment for children and we need to act immediately to get started
- Embrace challenges
- Promote professional learning communities among all Michigan teachers
- Courage
- Convene community conversations about the quality of education with cross-sectional representation. (teachers, administrators, parents, students, community members)
- Get better at telling the real story using narrative, quality research, and successful student outcomes
- Develop a power of belief...we know we can...teachers, administrators and students need to believe they can
- Shift from despair toward a belief that all students can strive for instructional excellence
- Restructure teacher professional development programs to include job-embedded learning, choice, teacher collaboration, time options, and alternative delivery models

- Reassess the school year and shift away from the agriculturally-based school calendar
- Change the way we bargain and become knowledgeable about the political nature of our governance systems
- Give a serious look at differentiated staffing in our schools
- Find balance between high structured teaching environments and more open-ended, flexible environments
- Look for and celebrate what is working in our schools
- More emphasis on preschool programs and the funding of preschool programs

D. Summary of Proposed Action Steps

- Interest-based action teams
 - Steering committee
 - Planning group
 - Non-partisan positions
 - Projects linked to this group
1. General consensus about developing the network of recognized educators as a force in enhancing instructional excellence. The network will prioritize items and issues of importance. This would then serve as the basis of our work.
 2. There was general agreement that a planning committee of some sort be organized to review the data, make suggestions to the network, and serve as a communication and/or coordinating link for the network. Members were invited to self-nominate for participation in the planning group. Cross representation is recommended. Future communication and coordination will continue through this group. (It is envisioned that this group may well function as a virtual group using available technologies for meeting and communicating in as much as funds are limited.)
 3. The following educators have self-nominated for the planning committee: David Borth, Lauren Childs, Sherry Cormier-Kuhn, Delores Flagg, Nancy Flanagan, Cindy Hasselbring, Kendra Hearn, Jim Linsell, Frank Miracola, Berna Ravitz, Bethany Rayl, Mike Stinnett.
 4. To operationalize the network, there was a range of opinion about how we should be organized. Some felt that the Milken Steering Committee structure might be useful to us; others felt that a more detailed planning structure might be needed.
 5. After much discussion, agreement was reached about consolidating the notes of the day and sending them to all members of the network.

II. Carousel Process

Participants were involved in a carousel process in the afternoon session designed to maximize small group interaction. In this process, six flipcharts were posted around the room. Participants were evenly divided among the six flipcharts and were given ten minutes to respond to a question posted at that station. At each ten-minute interval, participants rotated to the next station and responded to that question by affirming, adding, clarifying or questioning previous input. All participants had a chance to respond to the six questions. The questions and responses were:

A. What contributions can we make to improve the quality of instructional practice in our state? Particularly high priority schools?

- Identify new partnerships: businesses, non-profits, other community resources
- Providing detailed instruction for teachers in urban, at-risk schools-very different from the generic teacher-prep model
- Mentoring teams build relationships with high priority schools (creating genuine learning communities based on respecting and learning from differences-not “role model” schools)
- Create a state-wide database (defining “data” broadly) on issues and concerns around high priority schools
- Offer our assistance to schools
- Collaboration of Education College preparation

- Flexible career paths (rotation within education, university, private business, non-profits, cross grade, school district)
- Collaboration of colleges and educators and others—training future teachers
- Initiatives for becoming National Board Certified
- Classroom observations (teachers observing teachers...cognitive coaching)
- Pair similar schools for sharing best practices
- Write articles about successful practice
- Create a shared responsibility for raising the standards in high priority schools by rotating suburban and urban teachers
- Partnering successful districts with high priority schools (those with similar clientele) (mentor teachers)
- Smaller class size
- Increase support services
- Use data to craft decisions
- Build mentoring relationships for building principals
- Build stronger mentor relationships between teachers, administrators...
- Professional development resource list put together by the state and district
- Networking across the state by content or grade levels
- Teacher leadership academy (trained for leadership within district)
- Instructional leaders
- Limit focus to 2-3 issues (begin with most critical) and allow for learning curve/trial and error
- Give adequate time frame to address problems it took decades to form
- Systems of evaluation should watch what the priorities truly are

B. Is there a way that we can impact policies about high quality teaching and learning?

***Legislative policies? *State Board of Education policies? *Local policies?**

- Get involved in community organizations: coalition of concerned citizens; vote
- Promote the teaching profession – this will lead to connections with decision makers
- Become advocates – stay positive for your students and yourself
- Educational Forum involving business – to form a unified front
- Solicit support from major community groups: non-profits, faith-based
- Establish network; link and maximize gifts of group; seek out legislators; clarify legislation
- Get informed: emphatically and clearly voice your opinion
- Examine legislators – evaluate through “education lens” and establish an education slate
- Isolate key issues and hit those with unity (beachheads)
- One person at a time
- NLLB – No Legislator Left Behind...develop criteria for “highly qualified legislators” – especially education committees
- Universities set high standards and assume accountability
- Put administrators and teachers as advisors (with a real say) to policy makers at state and national levels
- Educators develop policy (be involved in writing)
- Help develop policy without having to run for office
- Promote/groom educators (especially former) to go into political office (school board and up to the national level)
- Attend and have a focused positive strong voice in local board meetings
- Invite political leaders to visit/job share with a teacher
- Adopt a state/local board member/legislator
- Letters to the editor/other means of public communication
- Be a resource to Legislators/House Education Committee

C. How can we play a role in identifying best practices?

How can we play a role in validating best practices?

- Use resources: NCREL (Learning Point Associates); North Central; RESAs and ISDs; State Board’s work on this issue
- MDE’s website (i.e. ‘child to child’)
- Schools “adopting” schools to share and spread promising practices
- Individuals creating school-to-school peer partnerships to share innovation (with common demographics)
- Using teacher-developed ideas that work as deep professional development
- Help with implementation, not simply “telling”
- Compiling ideas of exemplary teachers
- Subject/developmental level professional associations
- Working with the new state standards, putting out a call for model lessons and units
- Incentives/recognition for teachers who contribute to recognition (giving teachers more familiarity with and tools to teach these new standards)
- Modeling – share failures along with best practice
- Publish (via professional publications) and speak at professional conferences
- Attend a seminar...return home and teach peers
- Foster safe environment for peer sharing
- Access National Board for Professional Teaching Standards for instruction and professional development for “seasoned” staff
- Speak at conferences/universities
- Mentor teachers and encourage them to present/get involved
- Provide university people with “on the ground” information
- Create a non-threatening environment for sharing best practices
- Peer review-strength sharing
- Need documented data that “best practices” work
- Define “Best Practices” – can you identify the research
- Less is best – one or two basic themes...what are they?
- Relationship between teacher and student is critical to success
- Before choosing a ‘best’ practice lesson, first need to know/understand ‘best’ methodology for teaching
- Do it! Identify what works locally/globally

D. Is there a role that we can play in research addressing high quality instructional practices?

- Compile research-based authentic practices from existing organizations and other folks (AFT, higher education)
- Partnering with higher education to use our classrooms for action research of best practices
- Incentives to participate in action research (acknowledge/to other fields)
- Failure-phobia among educators
- Action research in classrooms cross district, building, classroom
- Collaboration with universities...create time for this
- Goal-based evaluation – action research
- Use available research – make ourselves informed consumers of research
- As a group, propose topics for action research. Support this research. Also support research coming from practitioners (mini grants)
- Data available to inform legislators and the education community
- Dichotomy/dissonance between knowing what works and proving/demonstrating it works
- Having research-based dialogue among colleagues
- Volunteer to partner with high priority schools to engage in action research collaboratively
- Book/case studies
- Involve students in research (evaluations, planning, participating...)
- Model classroom that uses an instructional practice and look at resulting data
- Release time to mentor new teachers for integrating instructional practices with their content objectives

E. How can we use technology as a means of extending our knowledge and network to assist teachers in all schools?

- Resurrect the Michigan Teachers’ Listserv
- Website
- MDE could be host site
- User friendly
- Use as a political voice (legislators typically only hear from four or five people on an issue)
- Passwords for different levels
- Use of video-cams to share professional development between schools and meet by face-to-face
- Distribute professional development on CDs (teacher-generated)
- Use listserv for political purposes and other information
- Develop professional chat rooms
- “Techno-buddies” to facilitate learning by wise but older practitioners
- Set up systems which require teachers to network with colleagues via technology
- Listserv, website, chats on specific topics
- Group chat with legislators to provide input on issues (like PD)
- Issues forum on a particular topic
- Need skilled moderator
- Hosting issues panels, then make the feedback gathered publicly available (we invite, we videotape)
- Using technology (cable, always looking for content) to record and distribute our ideas
- Use as another tool, not an add-on
- Sort through available resources and create a central site (high quality)
- Grade level links (high quality) to benchmarks, etc.
- Equitable, consistent technology in all districts – access to the web
- Better exposure/training to computer-based programs (MI Climb, Scope, curriculum, mapping...)
- Teacher-help website for teaching concepts – where it is on the web
- Video conferencing
- Distance learning

F. What can you do to support initiatives aimed at raising student achievement?

- Get support from parents for plans
- Flex time to free teachers
- Administrators can be involved in programs
- Get student input in what works (exit interviews)
- Celebrate success!!
- This presupposes lack of progress – we do a great job in U.S.
- Network of resources for initiating success and successful programs
- Become involved in creating or changing initiative
- Educate ourselves! Learn about NCLB
- Offer our expertise
- Find ways to fund initiatives
- Meaningful staff development
- Take something out to make room (time) for new
- Teacher permission to teach to goals
- Remove risk – develop community for risk taking without negatives
- Within/outside of educational community – promotion
- Be proactive and positive
- Promote positive successes
- Find money for support – financial investments
- Staff research and staff-driven impetus – consensus building

- Spread the word and ask for support (existing state and federal initiatives)
- Educate the public as to how the “measurements” are conducted (show data that measures apples to apples)
- Showcase research that highlights strategies/programs that already work
- Stick to what we know works regardless of present administration/way wind’s blowing
- Insist that we have feedback on assessment (data can be used to inform our educational decisions)
- Districts to self-evaluate
- Curriculum auditors

III. Participants

Katherine Afendoulis, Jill Ashworth, Teresa Ballard, Leah Barnett, Valerie Belay, Kathy Bergman, Lloyd Bingman, David Borth, Jeff Bradley, Henry Cade, Yvonne Caamal Canul, Heidi Capraro, Bill Cecil, Lauren Childs, Ron Collins, Randy Cook, Sherry Cormier-Kuhn, Brenda Crane, Denise Davis-Cotton, Vaenka Davis-Littles, Tom Dolan, Janet Duvendeck, Delores Flagg, Nancy Flanagan, Rosanna Formaro, Tim Fulcher, Denise Golden, June Green-Rivers, Kathie Grzesiak, Tim Hammar, Cindy Hasselbring, Kendra Hearn, Julie Helber, Amy Hodgson, Jeff Holbrook, Margaret Holtschlag, Flora Jenkins, Angela Johnson, Sandy Joslin, Janine Kopera, Doug Law, Jerry LeCureux, Jim Linsell, Pat Meaux, Frank Miracola, Pam Ogle, Greg Olszta, Janet Oord, Fred Page, Ben Perez, Berna Ravitz, Bethany Rayl, Darryl Robbins, Jeff Robinson, Jean Shane, Gail Sharpe, Kathy Sheiko, Gerald Sinkel, Linda Smith, Rob Stephenson, Mike Stinnett, Kim Taylor-Papp, June Teisan, Sharen Turnbull-Howard, Betty Underwood, Tom Watkins, Malverne Winborne, Karen Winters, Pam Wong

December 12, 2003

I. Sharing Promising Practices

Educators chose to participate in one of seven sessions led and facilitated by members of the developing network. The sessions' descriptions are provided.

A. Leading Your Team to Success

Bill Cecil, 2003-2004 Michigan Teacher of the Year

Description: This session will provide strategies that will create a positive, safe, and productive learning environment where individuals strive for their personal best while working together to achieve team goals.

B. The BIG Lesson: Taking Learning and Teaching into the Community

Margaret Holtschlag, 1999-2000 Michigan Teacher of the Year

Description: Dynamic conversations, personal connections to the world, deep knowledge, and extended time to learn are essential components for student achievement. These are ingredients in the BIG Lesson at museums, zoos, and nature centers in mid-Michigan. Participants will learn about this professional development model, cooperative research object-based learning, and the collaboration of community sites and schools.

C. Teaching for Understanding

Jim Linsell, 2001-2002 Michigan Teacher of the Year

Description: Teaching for Understanding is a simple framework developed by Boston area teacher researchers at Harvard University that helps answer these questions: What is understanding? How do I know that my students really understand something I teach? How can I get them to think, discuss, and write well beyond what they already know? Participants will be engaged in activities, which will promote Teaching for Understanding.

D. Begin With Me

Frank Miracola, Milken Educator 1994-95, and Susan Hardin, Macomb ISD

Description: This classroom-based initiative brings together both special and general education to help young writers. Technology supports strategies and motivating reasons for students to improve their writing. Participants will gain insight into the integration of writing and technology across the curriculum.

E. Follow the Leader-But Where Are You Really Going?

*Berna Ravitz, 2003-2004 Elementary Principal of the Year, and
Norma Barquet, Detroit Public Schools, Executive Director*

Description: Principals and teachers will explore the choices they make that can affect student achievement. Presenters will briefly explain the Reproduction and Resistance theories of educational culture within the context of Kouzes' and Posner's "Leadership Challenge." Participants will work together to create a true understanding of how they can promote staff leaders who will permeate the school climate, ultimately empowering students' self-actualization.

F. Rx4 ELA Writing Success

Gale Sharpe and Jeff Holbrook, Partner Educators

Description: Many schools give lots of opportunity for writing, but not enough guidance and instruction in how to improve writing. Help your students learn to write about a theme using the English Language Arts MEAP format. Together participants will examine actual, ready-to-use classroom prototypes and benchmark papers (Cross Text and Personal Narrative).

G. Thinking Outside the Box About Time

Karen Winters, Boyer Best Practices Award 2003

Description: Would you like your teachers to have one half-day per week for staff development with no additional cost and improved student learning? Come see, it can be done!

II. Panel Discussion

The following conference participants offered their personal insights about improving instructional practice in all schools in Michigan: David Borth, Henry Cade, Ron Collins, Kathie Grzesiak, and Kendra Hearn.

III. Afternoon Table Discussion Questions and Answers

Participants surfaced answers to questions. See below.

A. What does your school do really well?

- Empower teachers
- Balanced Literacy as a team
- Working as a team
- Upper grade level planning time
- Teach the Whole Child (physical, cognitive, psychological)
- Communicate effectively with stakeholders: teamwork is promoted

B. What is the biggest challenge you face as the principal or teacher in a high priority school?

- Balance between MEAP preparation and teaching
- Social and class issues of children
- Safe and orderly school
- Time to plan, network and take care of student needs
- Meeting the needs of English Language Learners
- Finding resources so NC is LB
- Time restraints
- Transience: mobility
- Diverse languages and AYP
- Apathy: students and parents
- Balance between good teaching and MEAP preparation
- Teacher mobility
- Social problems
- Educational scapegoating (it is our fault)

C. What is the most troubling question you live with as the teacher or principal of a high priority school?

- The media
- Dealing with the misperceptions of having a ‘label’
- Having a vision and striving to make it a reality
- Uncertainty with NCLB
- Why are teachers unreceptive to others coming into classrooms?
- When will we stop competing and do more collaborating between schools?
- How do we overcome labeling of failing school?
- Misperceptions that are attached to label (efforts seem to be for naught)
- How do we keep focus on academics?
- What are we doing and why?

D. What kinds of assistance have you sought or been given, to address these challenges and questions?

- Support from ISDs and professional organizations
- Break rules when needed
- Foster grandparents, volunteers, community, Partnership for Success, universities
- 400+ parents signed up to assist in school (classrooms, halls, crafts, after school...)
- Begging local businesses for support; local legislators invited to come in, parent volunteers (parental policing)

E. Based on what you heard during the Breakout Sessions and the Panel Discussion at lunch, what ideas do you have about taking advantage of this network to assist you in reaching instructional excellence?

- Take advantage of network/resource found on web
- Develop list of participants and their strengths
- Use e-mail to stay in touch for future planning
- Contact Karen Winters for information on Denver Group
- Political activism (attend meetings, contact legislatures)
- Get in contact with State Board members so our voice can be heard
- Dec. 16th deadline to respond to standards
- Invite presenters for PD in local schools (ex. ELA)
- Take positive energy from this conference back to school (sense of optimism, beacon of light)
- Tap resources...think outside the box

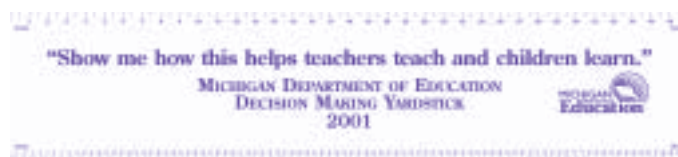
IV. Reflections From Large Group Debrief

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| rejuvenating | involved | synergy | provocative | rewarding | appreciated |
| driven | awesome | renewed | celebration | inspirational | informative |
| holistic | efficacious | motivating | proud | uplifted | energized |
| relieved | educational | supported | connected | lucky | productive |
| informed | engaged | | | | |

Participants

Cheryl Adkins, June Alexander, Janice Anderson, Sherry Baker, Linda Bean, Elizabeth Beccaw, Jo Benjamin, Dan Berezny, Marva Blocker, Larry Boehms, Lynn Bonyng, Frank Bosteth, Cheryl Box, Whitney Brodus, Barbara Builta, John Burrell, Nat Burtley, Angela Byrne, Tom Carlson, Earlene Carter, Sarah Cattell, Deborah Collie, David Crandall, Desmon Daniel, Nneka Daniels, Paula Daniels, Pilon Daniels, Holly Davis-Park, Deborah Dushane, Billie Fair, Belinda Findley, Brian Gamm, Roberto Garcia, Nicole Grant, George Gray, Beverly Green, Cynthia Haley, Pleshette Hardy, Branti Holland, Tonya Hope, Rose Hunter, Mary Jackson, Carol Johnson, Damon Johnson, Brenda Duckett Jones, Harry Knol, Nancy Labus, Julie Lubold, Calvin Lynch, Diana Martin, Darlene McClendon, Deborah McIntosh, Charles Moody, Brittany Mull, Roselyn Northcross, Anabele Ortiz, Vickie Patterson, Donna Poag, Karen Readman, Paul Reeves, Claudette Rice, Kathi Riehl, Marianne Rio, Gloria Robertson, Henry Rochelle, Hilda Rodriguez, Andrea Rodriguez, Jethene Ross, Carol Selby, Kyra Sichinga, Linda Simmons, Anthony Sitko, Brenda Slack, Delynn Smith, Linda Caine Smith, Sharon Staff, Elberta Stephens, Salli Stevens, Lillian Thomas, Linda Thompson, Mary Thompson, Celeste Van Drie, David Waddington, Lorene Walker, Kelly Warner, Patty Weisbach, Grant Whitehead, Geniveve Williams, Yvette Williams, Robert Woodford, Carl Word, Thomas Word (Most of the participants from the December 11 activities also participated on December 12.)

Participating State Board of Education Members: Kathleen Straus, Herbert Moyer, Carolyn Curtin, Elizabeth Bauer



Sponsors

State Board of Education, Michigan Department of Education, DTE Energy Foundation, Comcast of West Michigan, Tannenbaum Tree Farms, Milken Family Foundation

